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Georgian VIAs

Between Submission and Subversion

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Abstract: The Georgian VIA scene presents itself as a complex case study: the dynamics shaping it go beyond the much-discussed ideologisation of the musical genre of VIA, and beyond a clear-cut dichotomy of “official/unofficial” culture. Instead, Georgian VIAs of the 1960s and 1970s were able to find their own ways to express poetic and aesthetic qualities of Georgian national culture under the Soviet regime. Making use of spaces between submission to and subversion of the Soviet power, they created and thus founded the Georgian popular music tradition with its historical, linguistic and cultural specificity. Georgian VIAs such as , , performed mostly in Georgian and were able to sing about their nation’s history and its struggle for independence. With the help of the poetic, aesthetic and musical strategies analysed in this article, they distanced themselves from the Russian-speaking centre and created their own national peripheral musical discourse.

Keywords: Soviet republics; Georgia; Georgian VIAs; Georgian popular music; national culture.



Introduction

Georgians like to tell the story over and over again of how the first Soviet VIA band was actually Georgian. VIA *Orera* () was founded in the early 1960s and one can certainly argue that Georgian VIAs were among the first Soviet bands to explore the musical possibilities of Vocal-Instrumental Ensembles. Compared to the other Soviet republics there was a striking number of VIAs in Georgia (Gabunia 2019).¹

By looking at the Georgian tradition of the VIA phenomenon we can tell the story of the Soviet peripheral popular music spanning over three decades. Generally, the Soviet VIAs were also closely linked to the Soviet centre and to Estrada – official Soviet popular music. The infrastructure, important opportunities for music production – such as the Soviet vinyl industry with the establishment of *Melodiia* – and the reception processes of popular music in the Soviet Union were located in the big cities such as Moscow, Leningrad etc. Nevertheless, in the 1960s the first VIA-bands were formed in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, and soon they became popular across the entire Soviet Union and organised tours all over the world – though mainly in communist countries.

Despite the ideologisation of the musical phenomenon of VIA, it is important to ask how Georgian VIAs were able to find opportunities to express poetic and aesthetic specificity of Georgian national culture under the Soviet regime. As Alexandra Grabarchuk noted, there is a large space between submission to and subversion of Soviet power – a space that was actively used by Soviet VIAs. Beyond this “official-unofficial” binary we have to deal with a more ambivalent and complex picture (Grabarchuk 2015).

The aim of this paper is to show how the Georgian VIAs created their own musical dynamic be-

yond censorship and state politics in general. Especially in the mid-1970s, as in other Soviet republics, VIAs became an important musical trend in Georgian culture – next to the Georgian National Ballet (Sukhishvili), Georgian cinema music and Georgian romans. The cultural characteristics of Georgian VIA groups will be analysed, based on selected examples from the 1960s to the late 1980s. Here I am particularly interested in the specific sound, lyrics and aesthetic components such as style and stage image, as well as the aesthetics of album covers, and will focus on the characteristics of genre, lyrics, metaphoric, rhythm and melody, moreover, the influence of the western musical culture like US rock music and Italian popular music. The main concern of this paper is to deal with the research gap on the Georgian VIA tradition. The history of Georgian VIAs is part of an oral history and thus often represented fragmentarily and inaccurately. With the help of case studies the paper also aims to question the assumption that the VIA tradition can be automatically classified as “official”; inauthentic, artificial, sterile and perhaps propagandistic. It can be shown that Georgian bands had to deal with their specific social and political contexts and had their own agendas within the framework of the all-Soviet cultural system. It is important to determine general trends and changes over the decades with historical and cultural-analytical views on this phenomenon, and to analyse possible subversive lines in the Georgian VIAs.

I will also elaborate on how Georgian VIA-groups like *Orera*, *Dielo*, *Iveria* and many others created space to breathe and evolve so that they were able to present Georgian national culture in its historical, linguistic and cultural specificity. They found gaps in the cultural policy of Soviet Georgia and were able to perform mostly in Georgian about national culture and history, and its struggle for independence. With this strategy they distanced themselves from the Russian-speaking centre and created their own national peripheral musical discourse.

In her dissertation, Alexandra Grabarchuk brings together the idea of “vne”, used by Russian anthro-

¹ Georgian musicologist Lasha Gabunia has compiled a list with researchable VIAs from Georgia [Gabunia 2019]. This incomplete list can be found at the end of this essay.

pologist Aleksei Yurchak, and the Soviet popular music tradition:

Using Yurchak's idea of *vnye* (in brief, existing 'outside of' or 'external to' the official realm), Schmelz explains how the unofficial concert subculture took advantage of the gaps in the official musical structures. It neither fulfilled official Socialist Realist requirements, nor was it strictly illegal. It was neither subservient nor subversive. (Grabarchuk 2015: 14)

Georgian VIAs move exactly in these "in between-spaces" and create their own agenda within and beyond the strict ideological framework of the Soviet Socialist Realism. The musical strategies of working in "vne" will be explained in the following chapters.

Georgian popular music before the VIAs

The history of Georgian popular music from the 1950s is deeply connected with the history of Georgian VIAs. Before that time, the popular music tradition was strongly influenced on one hand by Georgian folklore – and specifically, Tbilisi urban Chanson, for example the tradition of Sazandari Orchestras – and on the other, Georgian opera. The formation of Georgian national opera is associated with the name of Meliton Balanchivadze. Fragments of his opera "Tamar Tsbieri" were performed in 1897 in St. Petersburg. The first Georgian opera performed in 1918 on the stage of the Tbilisi Opera House, and more importantly in Georgian, was Revaz Gogniashvili's "Kristine", based on the short story by Georgian author Egnate Ninoshvili – the most important literary voice of Georgian peasants. After the Italian (from the 1850s) and Russian (from the 1890s) phases, during The First Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-1921) Georgian opera flourished.

Georgian modern music had to develop under the Soviet system and the adoption of western music styles did not always run smoothly. As Robert Bardzimashvili from VIA *Orera* remembers in an interview, even in the 1950s it was forbidden to include foreign/non-Soviet songs in the bands'

repertoire (Gabunia 2001). Soviet censors were against the direct transfer of new western music traditions. Nevertheless, in 1933, the Georgian musician Vladimer Kandelaki was able to found one of the first Soviet jazz orchestras, *Dzhaz-Gol* (Джаз-Гол) in Moscow (Tsqitishvili 2018). During this period the Soviet centralised and bureaucratised industry of sound recording companies in Moscow could not and would not release popular music from peripheral Soviet Georgian on vinyl that fast. Later on, a large recording studio opened in Tbilisi and small record companies were established at the same time throughout the country (there were at least four companies in Tbilisi, two in western Georgia: one in Batumi and one in Kutaisi and one also in Abkhasia, in Sokhumi) (Gabunia 2019).

Until the 1940s one could not speak with certainty about the "popularity" of Georgian popular music. The Georgian Women's quartet *Debi Ishkhnelebi*² (, 1941-1967) were at the centre of the development of Georgian popular music. In the 1940s they released their first vinyl album and are the founding women of Georgian music addressed to broad masses of people.

The process of popularisation of the new Georgian music was accelerated by Georgian film whose soundtracks quickly brought great popularity to music groups like *Orera*.³ Georgian popular orchestral music, the first jazz bands and the Georgian acoustic music that has folkloric patterns, all simultaneously prepared the ground for the first Georgian VIA bands.

It is important to mention that before VIAs there were VIOs (Vocal-Instrumental Orchestra). The first Georgian VIO *Rero* () was formed by Giorgi Gabiskiria, an experienced trumpet player, in 1957. He experimented a lot with various musical forms of pop and jazz traditions. Soon, Soviet composer

2 *Debi Ishkhnelebi* are performing "Morbis aragvi": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RjKjsu9uCE8&feature=emb_title (accessed 09.2021)

3 In 1962, still as a quartet, *Orera* played songs by the Georgian composer Sulokhan Tsintsadze in the Georgian film by Nikoloz Sanishvili "Dolls Laugh" (geo:).

Konstantin Pevzner from Baku was invited to join the orchestra, which had the main role in accompanying various popular singers in Georgia. In the 1970s VIO *Rero* was headed by Givi Gachechiladze.

Another VIO called *Changi* () was formed in 1959 by Boris Richkov – husband of popular Georgian singer Giuli Chokheli. VIO *Changi* was mostly focused on jazz music.

VIA *Orera*

In 1958, Georgian musician Robert Bardzimashvili founded a vocal quartet which performed jazz music. The quartet had no name in the beginning. Later the quartet was officially transformed into one of the first vocal-instrumental ensembles in the Soviet Union called *Orera* (Gabunia 2019; Tsqitishvili 2018). In an interview with Georgian music critic Lasha Gabunia, Robert Bardzimashvili confirms that VIA *Orera* was supposedly included as a first VIA among the Soviet republics in a Soviet music encyclopedia – even long before VIA *Pesniary* and others (Gabunia 2001). The first members of the group were, as already mentioned, Robert Bardzimashvili, Teimuraz Davitaia, Zurab Iashvili and Tamaz Panchvidze.⁴ Later Vaqif Mustafa-Zadeh⁵, a famous Azerbaijani jazz musician and composer, founder of the Azerbaijani *Mugham* jazz tradition (Azerbaijani: Muğam – traditional Azerbaijani folk music)⁶, also joined *Orera*.⁷

In the following years, Bardzimashvili went on to create the jazz trio *Qafqaz* at the Georgian State Philharmonic Orchestra. In the meantime, the famous Georgian singers Nani Bregvadze⁸ – the most important female singer of Soviet and post-Soviet Georgia – and famous actor, singer and cultural figure – Vakhtang (Buba) Kikabidze – had joined *Orera*. Kikabidze was at different times the frontman of the VIAs *Dielo* and *Rero*, and of *Gepeis Orkestri*.

Rasha Orera – between global and local

Orera's discography includes more than ten records.⁹ The Soviet label *Melodiia* released their first studio album, *Rasha Orera* (), in 1964. The twelve songs are in Georgian, Russian, Italian, French, Spanish, English and Greek languages and this linguistic variety is also an important characteristic of other VIA bands. *Rasha Orera* is a multilingual album that focuses on themes such as love, friendship, with humorous songs, film music and folk melodies from all over the world, including African countries.

The title track picks up the tradition of polyphonic Georgian singing and locates itself in the culture and language of Georgian Svans. Svanetian musical tradition knows different cult rituals, which also include the iteration of two onomatopoeic words – *Rasha* and *Orera* (“ ”). In her dissertation *Musicological and Anthropological Aspects of the Cult Rituals of Svans*, Nana Mzhavanadze presents various examples of how these specific words can

Vaqif Mustafa-Zadeh performing *Getmə* (means “Don’t Go” in translation from the Azerbaijani Turkic). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Uz1oUNBxB0> (accessed 09.2021)

4 Soon professional musicians joined the group: Teimuraz Meghvinetukhutsesi (piano, vocal), Geno Nadirashvili (bass and vocal) and many more.

5 More about Vaqif Mustafa-Zadeh: https://web.archive.org/web/20160313143051/http://a-q.az/classificator/posvyashenie/posvyashenie_34, and here: <https://web.archive.org/web/20080607082528/http://www.jazzschool.ru/?p=101> (accessed 09.2021)

6

7 Later he created vocal-instrumental ensembles *Leyli* (womens quartet, 1970), *Sevil* (1971) and *Mugham* (1977-1979) in Baku.

8 Nani Bregvadze owes her music career starting in 1956 first to the Orchestra of the Georgian Polytechnic Institute and later to the Georgian State Orchestra *Rero* (1959-1964) and from 1964 to VIA *Orera*.

9 Full discography in Russian: Diskografiia VIA “Orera” (Gramplastinki i kasseti do 1991g.) <http://sssrviapiesni.narod.ru/oreradisk.html> (accessed 09.2021)



Fig. 1: VIA Orera: *Rasha Orera* (1964).

appear in different constellations in Georgian songs (Mzhavanadze 2018). With this theme song, *Orera* demonstrates its own polyphonic capabilities and roots, located in Georgian folk music. Bardzimashvili had his own version on the origin of the band name *Orera*. “Ora” comes from the kingdom of Urartu and means “hymn to the sun” (Gabunia 2001).

On the other hand, as a Soviet band, *Orera* had to locate itself in various levels of global culture. This tension between the specific Georgian locality, all-Soviet globality – which is here presented as Russian speaking cultural tradition – and in the end the communist globality of the world is of great importance here. To the level of “all-Soviet globality” *Orera* addresses two songs – “V chistom nebe” (“In the clear sky”) and the last song of the album with the title “Deti Pireia” (“Children of Piraeus”). Another Georgian VIA group, *Dielo*, is also performing “V chistom nebe” in the special tv-format of a “film-concert” one year later on “Leningradskoe Televidenie”.

The first song is a Russian love ballad (music by A. Kuznetsov and lyrics by V. Bokov) and the second is more unusual, as it originated in Greece – Manos Hatzidakis’ “Never on Sunday” (ru: “Deti Pireia”), which received in 1960 the Oscar for Best Original Song. The level of “communist globality of the world” in this debut album is represented by a

“Cuban Folk Song” (“ ”) and another composition called “African Melodies” (“ ”). The description of the African song says that *Orera* gathered together three melodies, from Mali, Senegal and Togo, using this musical potpourri to unite three former French West African colonies on the level of cosmopolitanism and the “world-music” paradigm.¹⁰

To summarise the structure of the debut record of *Orera*, it is important to mention, that besides the musical program (multilingual lyrics and multiethnic melodies), the communist system specified as obligatory, the musicians had the opportunity, to a small extent, to focus on the culture of Georgian singing. In her work, Grabarchuk mentioned the specific political situation of the time in connection with Soviet popular music:

After Khrushchev’s ‘secret speech’ in February 1956, Soviet music and literature breathed a collective sigh of relief. The gross failings of Stalinism were admitted in public; storytelling, filmmaking, and music turned away from dogma and reconsidered socialist culture all over again. (Grabarchuk 2015: 83)

Even in this specific period, it was possible for Georgian VIAs to occupy “a paradoxical space within Soviet society, between state norms and potential deviance” (Grabarchuk 2015: 95). *Orera* had the opportunity to sing in English – the language of the “enemy” and to show the diversity of Georgian national music. Even quoting the examples of VIAs like *Pesniary* and *Ariel* Grabarchuk notes that the orientation towards folk music was “a legitimising strategy” (Grabarchuk 2015: 72) in order to avoid censorship. With Georgian VIAs we see a different picture. In the following albums Georgian national culture gets more and more space.

The important paradigm change in the band’s discography is represented by the album *Dzvel Tbilishi* (; *In old Tbilisi*), which reached Georgian audiences in 1979. But we will come to this important release in more detail later.

¹⁰ The Mali Federation (also known as the Sudanese Republic) was a short-lived federal state in West Africa, consisting of the former French colonies of French Sudan (now the Republic of Mali) and Senegal.



Fig. 2: Still from VIA Orera: “Day by Day”, performed for Georgian television, (1968), min. 0:11.

Contradictions with the “question of language”

First, back to the question of language. *Orera* was perhaps the first VIA group in Georgia and probably throughout the Soviet Union, to have permission to sing in English. In the 1960s *Orera* was able to perform a limited number of songs from the repertoire of *The Beatles* and other western bands. In the second studio album, *Chvens Gogonebs* (; *To Our Girls*), one can find a first English song, “Day by Day”, a cover of a single by the American male vocal quartet *The Four Freshmen*, which was released in 1955. In 1968 *Orera* made one of their first music videos for Georgian television for this song, in which the aesthetic arrangement was very minimalistic and the performers remind us of western popular bands of that time by their identical white clothing and hair styles – like *The Beatles* in their early days.

Another English cover, “Lana” was written in 1962 by the American singer and songwriter Roy Orbison, and *Orera* made a music video for it in 1966. Soviet censorship allowed this, because *Orera* originally existed at the Institute of Foreign Languages in Tbilisi and singing in English was considered as a “practical subject” for the students. In conversation with Lasha Gabunia, Robert Bardzimashvili explains the background of these processes at the beginning of his musical career. He, as a student of the French department, and Inola Gurgulia (famous Georgian musician, poet and composer) as a teacher were the best combination for the later formation of VIA *Orera* (Gabunia 2001).

Even in *Orera*’s fifth record, *Songs of the Peoples of the World* (), released in 1971, English-language songs dominate. Of the fourteen songs on the album, seven were in English and not a single one in Russian.

Orera’s relationship with Russian is an interesting matter. *Orera* performed very few songs entirely in Russian – one was “Topolia”, after Sergeij Esenin’s poem “Ne zhaleiu, ne zovu, ne plachu”. More interesting is that in most cases Russian appears next to Georgian in the same song. Here we have an interesting “translation” work, in which the Georgian language is allowed to take more than a half of the space of the song. In “Akh, Turpav, Turpav” (“ , ”, originally a Georgian song) *Orera* switches to Russian in the second strophe but after that the song is framed again with the passage in Georgian. This song was originally performed by Julieta Muradeli and until the present time is still experiencing countless reinterpretations.

One review of *Orera*’s work notes that exactly “those horrible Georgian-Russian language chimeras” (georgianmusicblog 2014) make it impossible to really enjoy these compositions. Notwithstanding this harsh judgement, the obligatory bilingualism presents itself as an important part of Georgian VIAs’ strategy to smuggle “Georgian spirit” and Georgian national identity – beyond the Soviet one – into their own artistic work. Zaal Andronikashvili very aptly observed that in the case of VIA *Mziuri* and their bilingual (Georgian and Russian) song of the same name, the Russian version differs significantly from the Georgian text. “*Mziuri*” can be translated from Georgian as “sunny” and the Russian text highlights the significance of the victory of socialism – the sun here is a metaphor for glorious Soviet past and present (Andronikashvili 2010). But in each version the sun has different connotations. The topos of the “Solnechnaia Gruziia” (“sunny Georgia”) as a stereotyped and cliché image of Soviet Georgia is also very present here. Andronikashvili notes in his text “‘*Mziuri*’. Subversive bilingualism” that “on the one hand, ‘*Mziuri*’s’ Georgian text assimilates Soviet stereotypes, and



Fig. 3: VIA Orera: *Dzvel Tbilisshi*, (1979).

on the other hand, gives them a national, one might say, nationalist answer” (Andronikashvili 2010). Exactly this strategy can be characterised as “The formula of Georgian nationalism” (Andronikashvili 2010) under the Soviet power.

Orera’s musical climax – *In old Tbilisi* (1979)

By 1979, the group had already reorganised and Robert Bardzimashvili had left to create a new VIA called VIA 75. Under the artistic direction of Vakhtang (Buba) Kikabidze (vocal, drums), *Orera* overcame their artificial bilingualism in the album *Dzvel Tbilisshi* (*In Old Tbilisi*, 1979), an album of urban pop music with experimental elements of beat-music, psychedelic and jazz, whose thematic and sonic unity was also reflected in the cover art-work.

Vocalist Nani Bregvadze had introduced new vocal styles and with her the group also became one of the first VIA bands in Georgia with a female front singer. At this point VIA *Mziuri* must be mentioned again as it had only female members – or rather, young girls. As Zaal Andronikashvili has already noted, the formation of the band in 1971 was the Soviet-Georgian answer to the western tradition of the girl-band (Andronikashvili 2010).

It is important to mention that all eleven songs of the album *Dzvel Tbilisshi* are only in Georgian, and Tbilisi is foregrounded as a specific multiethnic,

multilingual and transcultural metropolis. With this album the old/archaic Georgian urban music tradition was integrated into the Georgian pop mainstream. In the past, the city of Tbilisi had occasionally been a subject of songs by different VIAs, for example the most famous song of Georgian composer Revaz Laghidze, “Tbiliso” sung by Nani Bregvadze and *Orera*, again in a bilingual (Georgian-Russian) version. This was an important song in Georgian-Russian cultural and political relations – but with *Dzvel Tbilisshi*, *Orera* had initiated a turning point in their own musical work. With this original rethinking of Georgian music traditions, the band established a national turn in its own band history and in the history of Georgian music in Soviet times. Here, we hear songs about Georgian national heroes, who died for their own country – for example “Gmirebis khsovnas”¹¹ (“ ”; eng: “In memory of heroes”), in which female and male vocals alternately sing about the country’s rich history. The topos of the Georgian land, which must always be defended against the enemy, is retold here. The lyrical subject asks the lost heroes here:

Why did the fathers take off their hats,
Born for victory,
Why are you coming home so late [...] (ibid.)

The next verse recounts how the Georgian hero defended the Georgian nation and fought at the cost of his own life. His name will not be forgotten, his name is “immortal” forever (Ibid.). The fifth song on the album is “Metekhi” and the text was originally written by Georgian poet Petre Gruzinsky. Here Christian Orthodox religion is introduced and *Orera* manages here, under Soviet censorship, to sing openly and in none too subtle words about the Metekhi Virgin Mary Assumption Church in Tbilisi. The “Metekhi” Church is located on the Metekhi cliff and was built between 1278 and 1289 AD. In Gruzinsky’s text, Metekhi is presented as a symbol

¹¹ The text by Georgian poets Giorgi Leonidze and Moris Potshkishvili.

of Georgian history and a holy place which the Georgian people can approach only through prayer.

Besides the lyrics, the cover of the album is also interesting, showing the Metekhi church very prominently and completely dominating the right corner of the image. The band and album names are bilingual – in Russian and Georgian – and the colour palette is designed in warm blue (the sky above the Metekhi church) and orange and red (The Metekhi Church itself). In the centre of the picture, *Orera* is captured during a performance. At this point it is important to note that the stage set and the whole arrangement is in harmonic relation with the surrounding landscape and specific architecture of the orthodox church. The symbiotic continuation of the Metekhi cliff through the Metekhi church and on the other through the stage aesthetics has symbolic meaning here. The stage dress of the vocalist Nani Bregvadze in a warm red and the paintings of the Georgian modernist painter Niko Pirosmani (Nikala) behind her create this special continuity and unity of Georgian traditional culture and religion and the modern dynamics of Georgian art.

Tbilisi as a source of inspiration connects all the songs on the album. Experimental songs “Kekel-Jan” (“”) or “Chems simgheras vin gaigebts” (“ ”; “Who Will Understand My Song?”) take up urban myths and characters of Tbilisi in a refreshing artistic way. Lyrics from Ietim Gurji – a Georgian poet, who wrote and performed his multiethnic poetry parallel in three languages, in Georgian, Azeri and Armenian – were the main source for the Tbilisi songs of *Orera*. Another song, “Pirosmani” (“”), narrates the precarious life of the painter who was closely linked with the Georgian capital. Tbilisi is also the subject of an earlier video appearance of the band – in “Dzveli tbilisis suratebi” (“ ”; “Pictures of old Tbilisi”) Buba Kikabidze and other band members present free interpretations of Georgian national dance and other dance traditions, for example „Kintouri“, more associated with Tbilisi.

This album was later followed by the anniversary album *We Are 25 Years Old* and at the end of the 1980s by the LP *Chemi saqarthvelo aq aris* (; *My*



Fig. 4: VIA Orera: *Chemi saqarthvelo aq aris*, (1990)

Georgia is Here) in which the “national revival” can be observed even more clearly. Now the English title appears next to the Georgian on the cover of the album and the monument of Georgian King and founder of Tbilisi Vakhtang Gorgasali and again the Metekhi Church can be seen in the background.

Orera often collaborated with other bands and singers. In 1969 the band released a joint album with VIA *Dielo*. Ten years later there was another collaboration between *Orera* and *Pesniary*.¹² The album *Orera and Dielo* was designed mostly for non-Soviet listeners and the song selection and the cover art supports this thesis. On the cover Russian appears next to English for the first time and *Orera* presents itself aesthetically in “Beatles-style” with colorful shirts and black ties. In the music video for “Krimanchuli” (“”; a traditional folk song from the Guria region in western Georgia) *Orera* stages itself in the same shirts now with Moscow in the background.

VIA *Dielo* – linguistic contradictions

¹² Official website of VIA *Pesniary*: <https://www.pesnyary.com/album.21.html> [01.09.2021]



Fig. 5: VIA Orera and VIA Dielo: *Orera and Dielo*, (1969)

VIA *Dielo*,¹³ founded in the early 1960s, was also a very important music project in forming the Georgian VIA tradition. In the 1960s *Dielo* was, with *Orera*, the only group performing officially as a VIA band but stood in their shadow. But the different musical characteristics of the groups can be clearly observed. The influence of jazz was much more present in *Dielo*, and Buba Kikabidze, with his charismatic stage image and his unique voice brought more popularity for the band, before he switched to *Orera*. In the above quoted review the author highlights other important points that characterise the band's special musical ideas. In comparison with *Orera*, *Dielo* paid more attention to the instrumental part and song arrangement, and uniquely connected jazz, Georgian urban and pop music and Georgian polyphony, while *Orera* followed "a lighter, superficial pop/beat" (georgianmusicblog 2013).

The language policy and the connection to the global socialist music tradition was also on the band's agenda. It is worth noting that one of *Dielo*'s first music videos in 1965 for "Basta" is presented as a "Congolese song" (Kongolezskaja pesnia "Basta"), though in fact it from Italy. Italian singer Adriano Celentano released the single in 1961 and *Dielo*

was able to sing it in "broken Italian", but as an African song. Shortly after the country's independence from Belgium in 1960, covering "Basta" can be understood as a joyful but programmatic and obligatory gesture of solidarity with the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Dielo's relation with Russian and English is very similar to *Orera*'s. In 1965 *Dielo* performed "Mack the Knife/The Ballad of Mack the Knife" ("Die Moritat von Mackie Messer") by Kurt Weill from Bertolt Brecht's *Dreigroschenoper* (1928) in English. In the 1970s, this time without Buba Kikabidze, but in cooperation with other great musicians, *Dielo* established a rockier sound and in 1972 covered Carlos Santana's legendary "Soul Sacrifice" without identifying the author. We have to differentiate here between the "official covers" and unofficial "translations" of English songs made in order to avoid Soviet censorship. With this strategy *Dielo* located itself both inside and outside of the system, "occupying the border zones" (Grabarchuk 2015: 94). In the "complex [and] contradictory workings of Soviet musical creation and dissemination" (Grabarchuk 2015: 95) *Dielo* took the opportunity of this "space in between".

From *Dielo*'s discography the fifth album, *Dielo '75* (1975) deserves special attention. In the first place, its "successful fusion of urban music tradition and psychedelic music" (georgianmusicblog 2013) must be highlighted here. The album's sounds in general are very close to early *Chicago* and other American rock bands. Influences of western rock music on Georgian VIA tradition became more and more visible in the following years. Later VIA groups like *Iveria* and *VIA 75* actively explored new musical genres from western culture.

13 The discography of VIA *Dielo*: <http://www.sssrviapesni.narod.ru/dielodisk.html> (accessed 01.09.2021).



Fig. 6: VIA Iveria: Iveria, (1974)

VIA Iveria – Georgian musicals and rock operas

VIA Iveria¹⁴ can be called the most popular Georgian VIA in the Soviet Union. The artistic director was Georgian composer Aleksandre Basilaia, who quickly introduced new western genres of popular music like musicals and rock operas to the Georgian VIA tradition. As Sandro Tsqitishvili noted in his article about the Georgian music dynamics in the 1970s, *Iveria* stood out with their “energetic and uncompromising” artistic image (Tsqitishvili 2018). Their debut album from 1974 clearly shows the influences of western hard rock music, psychedelic and garage-sounding pop music, and bands like *Uriah Heep* were very important musical role models in *Iveria*’s early days - the first album includes two songs of this iconic British band next to the Georgian national musical motifs.

The album’s opening song “Simghera saqarthveloze” (“ ”; “Song about Georgia”) “starts with a riff, which can be used as a symbolic introduction to the Georgian rock music of that time” (Tsqitishvili 2018). But in the 1980s, as well as being influenced by Western popular and light music, the band pursued a more clearly anti-communist line, supporting the liberal democratisation of Georgia.

In the 1980s, the specific Georgian VIA tradition was marked by the genre of musicals and rock operas. Aleksandr Zhurbin’s *Orfei i Èvridika* (*Orpheus*

and *Eurydice*, 1975) and Aleksei Rybnikov’s *Zvezda i smert’ Hoakina Mur’ety* (*The Star and Death of Joaquin Murrieta*, 1976) were the first examples in the USSR. The rock opera can be understood as a subgenre of the musical. As Alexandra Grabarchuk noted in her study, *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1970, music by Andrew Lloyd Webber and lyrics by Tim Rice) is a very good example for the interaction of both genres (Grabarchuk 2015: 153). The Soviet rock operas and musicals were “an anomaly” according to Grabarchuk, because they built up a direct cultural connection to western music traditions and came into conflict with the Soviet cultural policy:

Russian musicologist A. Tsuker defines rock opera as a fundamentally multifaceted phenomenon: ‘The principle of ‘poly’ functions on all of [rock opera]’s levels, allowing us to speak of the polyvalence of its plots, dramaturgy, genre status, and stylistic features.’ (Grabarchuk 2015: 172)

In Georgian musicals and rock operas we can clearly see how historical sources like Greek mythology become the most important thematic focus. But before that *Chkhikvta qorcili* (; *The Jay’s Wedding*) came out as a “rock opera” in 1984, though the record was promoted as a “fairy tale-musical” (ru: skazka-miuzikl, сказка-мюзикл), and became a hit. The adaptation of the important Georgian poet and writer Vazha-Pshavela’s short story had humorous elements of social satire, but the critical aspects were so “well” measured that Soviet censor did not intervene. In the Georgian and Russian versions, which differ from each other only minimally, all fifteen members of the group played a character from the short story. In this double studio album *Ivera*, as a Georgian VIA, had the rare opportunity to benefit from the technical possibilities of music recording of the time (georgianmusicblog 2012).

One year later *Iveria* celebrated the premiere of the musical *Argonavtebi* (1985, , *The Argonauts*). Interestingly only the Russian version of the musical has been officially released and the early Georgian version (part I and part II) is still only available in poor sound quality.

14 The discography by VIA Iveria: https://www.disc-a.ru/↔catalog/r_via/iveriya/d.html (accessed 01.09.2021).



Fig. 7: VIA Iveria: *Argonavtebi*, (1983)

In *Argonavtebi* the myth of Jason and the Golden Fleece, closely linked with the Georgian ancient past, is restaged musically and visually. The later Kingdom of Georgia was founded in this ancient region, located in today's western Georgia, near the Black Sea. The story of Jason and the Argonauts, of Medea and Aeëtes, and the King of Colchis (geo:) is the central narrative and important "evidence" or "proof" for identifying Georgians as an ancient civilisation with active cultural and political interaction with ancient Greek. As noted in the study "Landna(h)me Georgien. Studien zur kulturellen Semantik" (Andronikashvili; Jgerenaia; Thun-Hohenstein 2018) the Colchis and the Black Sea have an important place in Georgian cultural memory. The sea as a border, as a threat, a path or even as a bridge to foreign cultures has a special symbolic meaning and an ambivalent connotation in Georgian history and culture.

However, Georgian literature discovers the myth of Jason's journey, bringing new cultural importance to Colchis, only in the 18th century with Akaki Cereteli's drama *Medea* (sic) (1893-1895). From this time on, we can talk about the "literarisation" of the myth of the Golden Fleece in Georgia. Akaki Cereteli "rationalised, nationalised and politicised the myth of Colchis" (Andronikashvili; Jgerenaia; Thun-Hohenstein 2018: 337), and in this variation

of the myth the threat that comes originally from Greece can be connected with imperial Russia.

The later Soviet project of a "New Colchis" is, in its earlier phase, connected with Konstantin Paustovskii ("Povest Kolchida", 1934). At the end of the 1930s, the Soviets developed a plan to transform this Black Sea region with massive agricultural projects that had economic, ideological and, even more importantly, cultural dimensions. However, this forward-looking campaign was developed on the ancient past of this region in western Georgia: "The Soviet large-scale construction project was to take up an ancient inheritance and to bring the old and sunken Colchis, rich in gold, back to Soviet life" (Andronikashvili; Jgerenaia; Thun-Hohenstein 2018: 373f.), aptly write the authors of the book.

Colchis provided a suitable formula to realise this new Soviet utopia, with the swamp and marsh area that remained after the fall of the old "golden civilisation" drained. The Colchians were presented as ancestors of the Soviet (Georgian) workers who were motivated to defend their freedom from the non-Soviet world and were now building the new Colchis as a paradise on earth (Andronikashvili; Jgerenaia; Thun-Hohenstein 2018: 374). Later literary adaptations of the myth were not so clear in their message and highlighted the original ambivalence and ambiguity of the story. In 1973 Georgian author Otari Chiladze wrote a novel titled *A Man Was Going Down the Road*¹⁵ () in which he describes the loss of the Black Sea because of the old sin of the inhabitants of the region. Exactly this ambivalence was concealed by the authors of the Soviet cultural project of Colchis (Andronikashvili; Thun-Hohenstein 2018: 39).

And now it is important to ask, how did the musical *Argonavtebi* deal with this myth? Album and stage versions are very different. In the Georgian adaptation for the stage the humorous elements dominate over the classical story of the Argonauts

¹⁵ The novel *A Man Was Going Down the Road* (1973) was translated into English by Donald Rayfield. 2012. London, Garnett Press.

and the Colchians, whereas in the album version the central figures, such as Medea, Jason, Orpheus and Aeëtes perform their arias, with serious and dramatic tone. In the Georgian album version the knowledge about Colchis is tested during a comedic school lesson, for example Jason must answer the “tricky” question of how to describe the Georgian traditional table. Later the Amazons from the island of Lesbos sing an anti-patriarchal song: “There will be no mercy. Now you will listen to us; we have listened to you for a long time, enough is enough”.¹⁶ Furthermore neighbours from the Nordic and Eastern countries sing Georgian regional songs and in return receive gifts from Aeëtes. In this song competition, one participant from the “icy north” called “Chukchi” tries to sing impressively about Colchis and the presenter cries out “100 packs of the Colchian export tea!”, which the singer duly receives.¹⁷ Here we see how the ideological program finds its way into the new Soviet narrative of Colchis. The development of the agricultural economy through tea, citrus and wine instead of the marshy landscape is anecdotally staged here.

Even more interesting than the album and stage version is the “Muzykal’nyi khudozhestvennyi fil’m” (en: “musical artistic movie”). Evgenii Ginzburg’s *Veselaia khronika opasnogo puteshestviia* (eng: *A Hilarious Chronicle of a Dangerous Journey*) was broadcast on Soviet television in 1986. *Iveria* and Aleksandre Basilaia (Screenwriter Jemal Baghashvili) were responsible for the musical realisation of the project. In the very first scene of the film the narrator claims for a collective ‘we’, that the film presents “our version of the journey of the Argonauts to Colchis”.¹⁸

As Jason and his crew survive the various dangers on their way to Colchis, they finally arrive at the



Fig. 8: Evgenii Ginzburg and VIA *Iveria*: *Veselaia khronika opasnogo puteshestviia* (1986)

Black Sea coast, and the beautiful green mountainous landscape spreads before them. The Colchians, wearing Georgian national costumes, welcome the guests with the world famous Georgian hospitality. The stereotypical image of Georgians as quintessential hosts, which is certainly a Soviet hegemonic construction, is again prominently staged here. With an old Georgian town as a backdrop, even the enemies are received with celebration. To reach his goal and obtain the Golden Fleece, Jason (played by Zurab Qipshidze) must first convince the king and the beautiful Medea (played by Lika Qavzharadze). The formula of the Soviet agricultural work emerges here in all clarity, as Jason is presented by Aeëtes with the “utopian task”, of planting and tilling the desolate land in such a way that the region’s best grapes will grow there – all in the course of a single day.

The example of *Argonavtebi* shows clearly that even in the 1980s the censorship did not allow certain musical processes. Bands like *Iveria* were forced to operate in the national peripheral context with

16 The lyrics from the Georgian stage version of the musical *Argonavtebi*, part I: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=↵o9wq1FwWEXQ&t=966s> (accessed 01.09.2021)

17 The lyrics from the Georgian stage version of the musical *Argonavtebi*, part II: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GF-↵hbTf9PqM> (accessed 09.2021)

18 The film “*Veselaia khronika opasnogo puteshestviia*”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m9pGQ2RdRns> (accessed 09.2021)

alternative narratives in Georgian language. These “unofficial” Georgian versions are more subversive on the specific national level and their references to the historical context can be interpreted politically. On the Soviet cultural level they operated with the strictly predetermined linguistic forms.

Referring to A. Tsuker, Alexandra Grabarchuk summarises very aptly: “No matter which rock opera we examine, we see everywhere a similar parallelism and duality of content, connecting within itself the universe and daily life, the philosophical and the social, balancing between modernized eternity and the symbolic present” (Grabarchuk 2015: 173). The balancing dynamics between the spaces of submission and subversion defines the Georgian VIA tradition.

Final remarks

To summarise the main findings of this article, it is important to mention again the ambivalent structures in which Soviet VIA groups existed. Beyond the binarism of “official vs. unofficial” Soviet and especially the Georgian VIAs occupy the “vne-spaces” trying out new traditions of popular music from all over the world, including the USA. By dealing with specific political, social and cultural contexts, Georgian bands created their own agendas while keeping an eye on the framework of the all-Soviet cultural system. Georgian VIA-groups like *Orera*, *Iveria* and *Dielo* present Georgian culture and its national foundation and moreover its historical and linguistic specificity. Using the example of Georgian VIAs, we can speak about the “national turn/revival” in the 1970s. As already shown above, Georgian VIAs broached the topics of national history and Georgia’s struggle for independence mostly in the Georgian language. On the one hand they distanced themselves from the Russian-speaking centre and were active in the peripheral national cultural discourse (VIA *Orera* with the album *In old Tbilisi* or albums of VIA *Dielo* and *Iveria*), on the other hand they had to locate them-

selves in the global culture, that is, of course in the Soviet understanding of it. The question of language is central for the understanding of Georgian VIAs. The obligatory bilingualism (Georgian and Russian) is very significant, but even in this state-determined context there remained a strategy of “smuggling” Georgian national identity and spirit into the Soviet mainstream musical discourse. The example of English “covers” and “translations” of English songs is also very relevant here.

With the new genres of musical and rock opera Georgian VIAs worked in contradiction to ideological guidelines, with direct cultural connections to western music. Here historical sources from Greek mythology (The myth of Colchis) are an important thematic focus. And finally, Georgian VIAs were located in a paradoxical space between Soviet cultural policy and its “vne-space” outside the system.

This article is the very first attempt to close the research gap on VIA tradition in Soviet Georgia. This complex topic hopefully will find further research.

Appendix

Incomplete list of Georgian VIAs

VIA “75” (founded in 1975; artistic director: Robert Bardzimashvili)

VIA “Aisi” (founded in 1974, artistic director: Giorgi Qartvelishvili)

VIA “Alioni” (founded in 1985, artistic director: Levan Tschkheidze)

VIA “Apsni-67” (founded in 1967, artistic director: Nodar Sagaria)

VIA “Berikoni” (founded in 1989, artistic director: Teimuraz Maisashvili)

VIA “Bonvaroni” (founded in 1971, artistic director: Temur Kharebovi a.o.)

VIA “Dielo” (founded in 1962, artistic director: Amiran Ebralidze)

VIA “Engur” (founded in 1980, artistic director: Givi Gabunia)

VIA “Iveria” (founded in 1968, artistic director: Aleksandre Basilaia)

VIA “Kolkheti” (founded in 197?, artistic director: Marsel Kapanadze)

VIA “Labirinti” (founded in 197?, artistic director: Merab Kiladze)

VIA “Lale” (founded in 1970, artistic director: Eduard Sepashvili)

VIA “Mziuri” (founded in 1971, artistic director: Rapael Kazariani, Guram Jaiani)

VIA “Natvris Khe” (founded in 1982, artistic director: Roman Rtskhiladze)

VIA “Orera” (founded in 1961, artistic director: Robert Bardzimashvili)

VIA “Orioni” (founded in 1971, artistic director: Boris Gegeshidze)

VIO “Rero” (founded in 1957, artistic director: Giorgi Gabiskiria a.o.)

VIA “Pazisi” (founded in 1971, artistic director: Boris Shkhiani)

VIA “Teatroni” (also called “VIA of Georgian Television and Radio”, founded in 1982, artistic director: Zurab Kobeshavidze)

VIO “Changi” (founded in 1959, artistic director: Boris Richkov)

VIA “Tsitsinatela” (founded in 1967, artistic director: Soso Ebralidze)

VIA “Jadosnuri Gzebi” (founded in 1985, artistic director: Teimuraz Maisashvili)

VIA “Jazz Noneti” (founded in 1970, artistic director: Aleksandre Kiladze)

VIA “Jazz Korali” (founded in 1985, artistic director: Aleksandre Kiladze)

VIA “Georgia” (founded in 1988, artistic director: Robert Bardzimashvili)

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Irine Beridze (b. 1987) is a PhD student at the Free University to Berlin and an academic assistant at the Institute for East European Studies. After earning her bachelor degree in German Studies at the Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, she moved to Germany and completed her Master’s degrees in New German Literature (Neue Deutsche Literatur) and East European Cultural Studies (Osteuropäische Kulturstudien) at the University of Potsdam and at the Free University Berlin. Her research interests touch on memory and transcultural studies and postcolonial studies. In her PhD-project *Transfer Processes of Memory in the Modern German Literature of Eastern European Authors* she aims to research the question of the relationship between migration and memory from an interdisciplinary point of view between Slavic and German Studies. Her other research interests include: History of Soviet-Georgian Cinema, Jewish Cultures in the South Caucasus and Theories of Transculturality/Transnationality.

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Suggested Citation

Beridze, Irine. 2021. “Georgian VIAs – Between Submission and Subversion.” *Putting the Empire to Music. The Phenomenon of Vocal-Instrumental Ensembles (VIA)* (ed. by Clemens Günther and Christiane Schäfer). Special issue of *Apparatus. Film, Media and Digital Cultures in Central and Eastern Europe* 13. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17892/app.2021.00013.278>

URL: <http://www.apparatusjournal.net/>

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